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NEGROES AND THE NATIONAL WAR EFFORT

AN ADDRESS BY
FREDERICK DOUGLASS

WITH A FOREWORD BY
JAMES W. FORD

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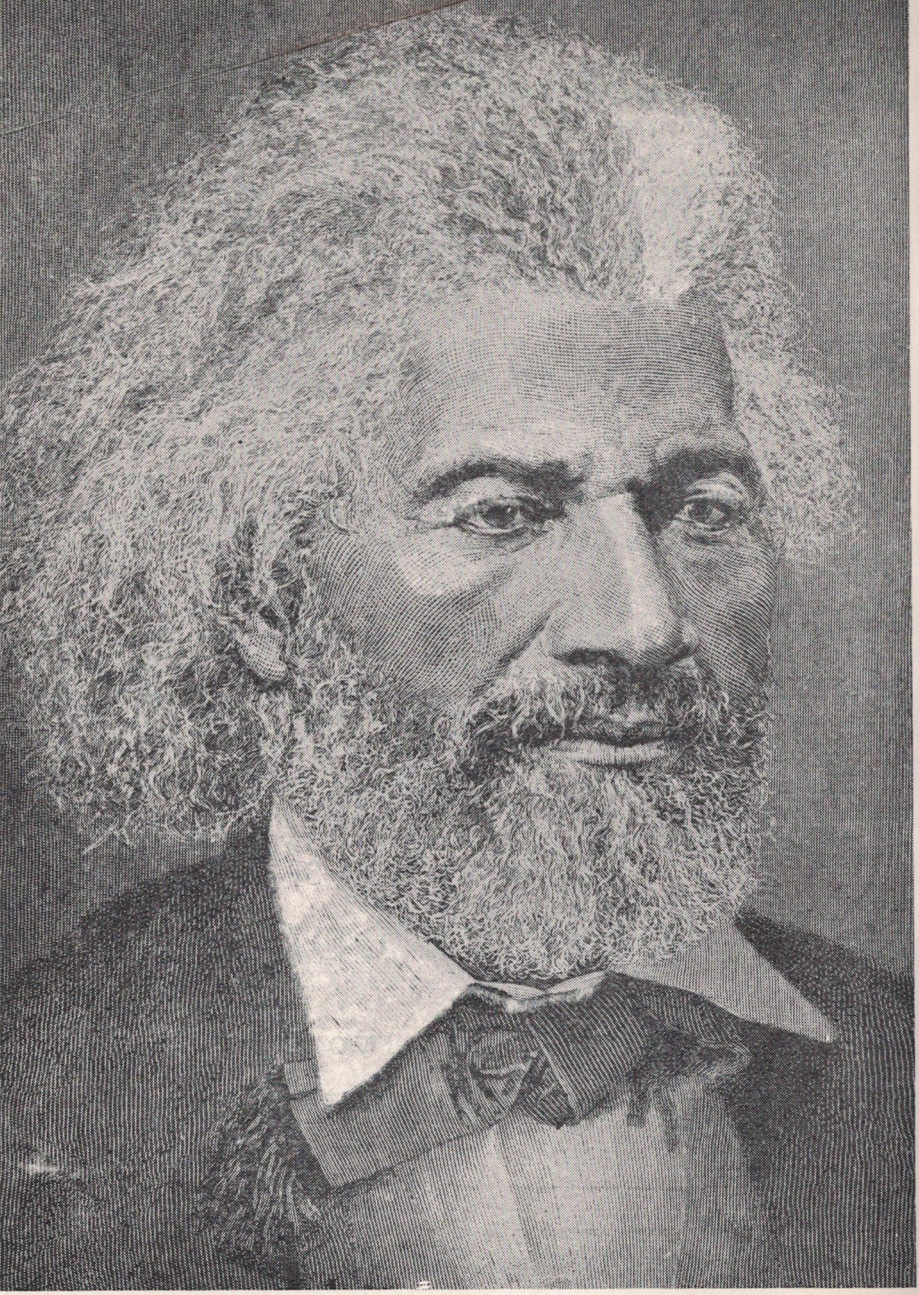

FREDERICK DOUGLASS (*1817–1895*)

NEGROES AND THE NATIONAL WAR EFFORT

FOREWORD BY JAMES W. FORD

THESE are trying days for our nation. They are even more trying than those in the national crisis of 1860, when the threat to the nation's existence demanded just as today the integration and utilization of Negroes to the fullest in the struggle to preserve the Union. Frederick Douglass' leadership in clarifying the issues that resulted in the raising of Negro troops and their integration into the Union armies is graphically illustrated in the following speech made by that great Negro Abolitionist in Philadelphia, at the National Hall, on July 6, 1863.

Again the Negro people dare not fail to appreciate their stake and their role in helping to win the war today against the Axis powers, without which the struggle for the rights of the Negro people will be set back for generations. Frederick Douglass, one of the outstanding figures of the Civil War period, comes forward now to challenge those who declare "this is not the colored man's war" and who would minimize the stake of the Negro people in this titanic global conflict. Douglass has not fully come into his own even among the most politically advanced white and

Negro masses in the United States. Too little has been made known about him by the official historians. Those who have written the history of our country in the decades since the Civil War have either deliberately, or out of an ignorance nurtured by prejudice, omitted Douglass' contribution to our nation. Falsification by silence has to a considerable extent concealed the real issues of that period from the masses.

In the Civil War the nation was faced with dissolution. The Union had to be saved or liberty would have been lost for all. All true patriots rallied against those who aimed to dismember our country and who, if they had been successful in defeating the Union, would have imposed the system of human slavery over the entire nation and spread it throughout Central and South America.

Labor exercised an important role in determining the course of the Civil War. It supported Lincoln and stood solidly for the abolition of slavery. Of strategic importance also was the active participation of Negro troops in helping to determine the successful outcome of the war. No one understood this more clearly than Frederick Douglass. In his speech Douglass makes devastating arguments against wavering and hesitation in regard to supporting the war, by his brilliant analysis of the two forces that were struggling for mastery in the military drama of the Civil War. Although vacillation and weakness on the slavery question were found in high places in the government, Douglass nevertheless admonished colored men to join the Union Army and fight for freedom and liberty. He declared that the logic of events should convince all Negroes that their basic interests demanded their participation as fighters in the ranks of the Union Army. When Confederate cannon shattered Fort Sumter at

Charleston—the Pearl Harbor of the Civil War—Douglass at once "saw the end of slavery" for his people. He threw himself into mobilizing Negro troops for the Union Army. He fought the Copperheads.

In the crisis today the nation is fighting for its existence against new would-be enslavers of the whole of humanity, the Nazi-fascist Axis—the most fiendish imperialists in all history. We have the McClellans, pro-Hitlerites and appeasers of today, black and white. We have our Lindberghs, Hamilton Fishes and Coughlins; we have the Ku Klux Klan and our Cliveden Set, all of whom constitute the most serious obstacle to the war against Hitler and are a Hitlerite camp of reaction at home. We have a group of Southern poll-tax Congressmen, who, under the guise of supporting the government's foreign policy, obstruct every measure necessary for the fullest mobilization of our human and material resources to destroy the fascist Axis.

Shameless policies of "Aryan superiority," such as blood segregation, can only contribute to undermining unity of the nation. There is not a single American patriot who does not glory in the sacrifices that Negro Americans have made in giving the last drop of their blood to sustain this nation since its birth until the present moment. We must fight against the appeasers in the spirit which Douglass indicated, of unity of white and black.

A matter of the gravest concern to all Americans anxious for the destruction of everything that Hitlerism stands for is the widespread discrimination against Negro Americans in the armed forces and in the industries, which militates against their fullest mobilization for the war effort. All Americans—Negroes and whites—can never be satisfied until this blot is erased from American life. In the spirit and tradition of Frederick Douglass,

this question is not placed as a "condition for support of the war"; rather, it is advanced in the interests of most effectively prosecuting the war. In the course of this war the struggle for democracy and equality must be furthered. Unless all unite *effectively* to defeat Hitler, white and black will become the chattel slaves of fascism.

The work of Douglass in rallying his people in support of the war in the interests of national unity was made easier by labor's support of the anti-slavery cause. The leadership of Douglass, as history has proved, was wise and sound.

Labor is immensely stronger today. It is the backbone of the nation. Its task of rallying the Negro people in support of the war against Hitler requires united effort in wiping out discrimination and lynching. This constitutes a basic part of the battle for production. It means helping win the war on the battlefields. It means helping the government rally all the forces of the nation to win the war.

The crisis which faces the nation today requires national unity embracing all classes and peoples to preserve the very national existence of the United States. In developing further its policies for combating discrimination, the government will help smash the nefarious efforts of the Axis-aiding demagogues and splitters, and will strengthen national unity for dealing the death blow to the fascist Axis.

"Events more mighty than men," said Douglass, ". . . have placed us in new relations with the government and the government with us."

The republication of this speech of Frederick Douglass should serve, not alone to honor him, but to make more clear the tasks we face today and to stimulate us fully to meet them.

THE ADDRESS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

MR. PRESIDENT and Fellow Citizens—

I shall not attempt to follow Judge Kelley* and Miss Dickinson** in their eloquent and thrilling appeals to colored men to enlist in the service of the United States. They have left nothing to be desired on that point. I propose to look at the subject in a plain and practical common-sense light. There are obviously two views to be taken of such enlistments—a broad view and a narrow view. I am willing to take both, and consider both. The narrow view of this subject is that which respects the matter of dollars and cents. There are those among us who say they are in favor of taking a hand in this tremendous war, but they add they wish to do so on terms of equality with white men. They say if they enter the service, endure all the hardships, perils and suffering—if they make bare their breasts, and with strong arms and courageous hearts confront rebel cannons, and wring victory from the jaws of death, they should have the same pay,

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* Judge Kelley: William D. Kelley, a Republican of Philadelphia, who was a Congressman during the Civil War. In the House, he pressed constantly for a more vigorous conduct of the war, the arming of the Negroes and emancipation.—*Editor.*

** Anna Dickinson: Poet, Abolitionist orator. In 1864, at the age of 21, she spoke in the House of Representatives for the benefit of the Freedmen's Relief Association. From the beginning of the war she advocated emancipation, and division of the large plantations among the freed Negroes. She was active in exposing McClellan's treason on the battlefield.—*Editor.*

the same rations, the same bounty, and the same favorable conditions every way afforded to other men.

I shall not oppose this view. There is something deep down in the soul of every man present which assents to the justice of the claim thus made, and honors the manhood and self-respect which insists upon it. [*Applause*] I say at once, in peace and in war, I am content with nothing for the black man short of equal and exact justice. The only question I have, and the point at which I differ from those who refuse to enlist, is whether the colored man is more likely to obtain justice and equality while refusing to assist in putting down this tremendous rebellion than he would be if he should promptly, generously and earnestly give his hand and heart to the salvation of the country in this its day of calamity and peril. Nothing can be more plain, nothing more certain than that the speediest and best possible way open to us to manhood, equal rights and elevation, is that we enter this service. For my own part, I hold that if the Government of the United States offered nothing more, as an inducement to colored men to enlist, than bare subsistence and arms, considering the moral effect of compliance upon ourselves, it would be the wisest and best thing for us to enlist. [*Applause*] There is something ennobling in the possession of arms, and we of all other people in the world stand in need of their ennobling influence.

The case presented in the present war, and the light in which every colored man is bound to view it, may be stated thus. There are two governments struggling now for the possession of and endeavoring to bear rule over the United States—one has its capital in Richmond, and is represented by Mr. Jefferson Davis, and the other has its capital at Washington, and is represented by "Honest Old Abe." [*Cheers and long-continued applause*]

These two governments are today face to face, confronting each other with vast armies, and grappling each other upon many a bloody field, north and south, on the banks of the Mississippi, and under the shadows of the Alleghenies. Now, the question for every colored man is, or ought to be, what attitude is assumed by these respective governments and armies towards the rights and liberties of the colored race in this country; which is for us, and which against us! [*Cries of That's the question*]

Now, I think there can be no doubt as to the attitude of the Richmond or Confederate Government. Wherever else there has been concealment, here all is frank, open, and diabolically straightforward. Jefferson Davis and his government make no secret as to the cause of this war, and they do not conceal the purpose of the war. That purpose is nothing more nor less than to make the slavery of the African race universal and perpetual on this continent. It is not only evident from the history and logic of events, but the declared purpose of the atrocious war now being waged against the country. Some, indeed, have denied that slavery has anything to do with the war, but the very same men who do this affirm it in the same breath in which they deny it, for they tell you that the abolitionists are the cause of the war. Now, if the abolitionists are the cause of the war, they are the cause of it only because they have sought the abolition of slavery. View it in any way you please, therefore, the rebels are fighting for the existence of slavery—they are fighting for the privilege, the horrid privilege of sundering the dearest ties of human nature—of trafficking in slaves and the souls of men—for the ghastly privilege of scourging women and selling innocent children. [*Cries of That's true*]

I say this is not the concealed object of the war, but the openly

confessed and shamelessly proclaimed object of the war. Vice-President Stephens has stated, with the utmost clearness and precision, the difference between the fundamental ideas of the Confederate Government and those of the Federal Government. One is based upon the idea that colored men are an inferior race, who may be enslaved and plundered forever and to the heart's content of any men of a different complexion, while the Federal Government recognizes the natural and fundamental equality of all men. [*Applause*]

I say, again, we all know that this Jefferson Davis government holds out to us nothing but fetters, chains, auction-blocks, bludgeons, branding irons, and eternal slavery and degradation. If it triumphs in this contest, woe, woe, ten thousand woes, to the black man! Such of us as are free, in all the likelihoods of the case, would be given over to the most excruciating tortures, while the last hope of the long-crushed bondman would be extinguished forever. [*Sensation*]

Now, what is the attitude of the Washington government toward the colored race? What reasons have we to desire its triumph in the present contest? Mind, I do not ask what was its attitude towards us before this bloody rebellion broke out. I do not ask what was its disposition when it was controlled by the very men who are now fighting to destroy it when they could no longer control it. I do not even ask what it was two years ago, when McClellan* shamelessly gave out that in a war between

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* George B. McClellan: Major-General in the U. S. army in 1861. Bitterly opposed to emancipation of the Negro people. McClellan ordered his soldiers to return to their owners fugitive slaves. When Lincoln had removed him from command, McClellan ran against Lincoln for the Presidency in 1864, on the Democratic ticket, calling

loyal slaves and disloyal masters, he would take the side of the masters against the slaves—when he openly proclaimed his purpose to put down slave insurrections with an iron hand—when glorious Ben. Butler* [*Cheers and applause*], now stunned into a conversion to anti-slavery principles (which I have every reason to believe sincere), proffered his services to the Governor of Maryland, to suppress a slave insurrection, while treason ran riot in that State, and the warm, red blood of Massachusetts soldiers still stained the pavements of Baltimore.

I do not ask what was the attitude of this government when

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for "peace." Marx said of McClellan: ". . . his influence acted as a brake on the general conduct of the war. . . . McClellan and most of the officers of the regular army who got their training at West Point are more or less bound to their old comrades in the enemy camp by the ties of *esprit de corps*. . . . McClellan knew how to keep every military traitor from court martial, and in most cases even from dismissal. . . . McClellan wages war not in order to defeat the foe, but rather in order not to be defeated by the foe and thus forfeit his own usurped greatness."—Marx-Engels, *The Civil War in the United States,* International Publishers, New York.—*Editor.*

* Benjamin F. Butler: At first a pro-slavery Democrat of Massachusetts, Butler, in the course of the Civil War, became a staunch anti-slavery man. He was a Brigadier-General, later a Major-General, in the Union Army. Placed in charge of Fortress Monroe, in Virginia, he admitted to it, even before the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, fugitive slaves whom he fed and clothed and put to work for the Union. He refused to return these Negroes to their former masters, answering his critics with the statement that the ex-slaves had been Confederate property and were therefore "contraband of war." In 1862 Butler became military governor of New Orleans after its capture by the Union Army. At New Orleans he raised Negro troops, setting a precedent which later became national policy.—*Editor.*

many of the officers and men who had undertaken to defend it, openly threatened to throw down their arms and leave the service if men of color should step forward to defend it, and be invested with the dignity of soldiers. Moreover, I do not ask what was the position of this government when our loyal camps were made slave hunting grounds, and United States officers performed the disgusting duty of slave dogs to hunt down slaves for rebel masters. These were all dark and terrible days for the republic. I do not ask you about the dead past. I bring you to the living present. Events more mighty than men, eternal Providence, all-wise and all-controlling, have placed us in new relations to the government and the government to us. What that government is to us today, and what it will be tomorrow, is made evident by a very few facts. Look at them, colored men. Slavery in the District of Columbia is abolished forever; slavery in all the territories of the United States is abolished forever; the foreign slave trade, with its ten thousand revolting abominations, is rendered impossible; slavery in ten States of the Union is abolished forever; slavery in the five remaining States is as certain to follow the same fate as the night is to follow the day. The independence of Haiti is recognized; her Minister sits beside our Prime Minister, Mr. Seward, and dines at his table in Washington, while colored men are excluded from the cars in Philadelphia; showing that a black man's complexion in Washington, in the presence of the Federal government, is less offensive than in the city of brotherly love. Citizenship is no longer denied us under this government.

Under the interpretation of our rights by Attorney General Bates, we are American citizens. We can import goods, own and sail ships, and travel in foreign countries with American

passports in our pockets; and now, so far from there being any opposition, so far from excluding us from the army as soldiers, the President at Washington, the Cabinet and the Congress, the generals commanding and the whole army of the nation unite in giving us one thunderous welcome to share with them in the honor and glory of suppressing treason and upholding the star-spangled banner. The revolution is tremendous, and it becomes us as wise men to recognize the change, and to shape our action accordingly. [*Cheers and cries of We will*]

I hold that the Federal government was never, in its essence, anything but an anti-slavery government. Abolish slavery to-morrow, and not a sentence or syllable of the Constitution need be altered. It was purposely so framed as to give no claim, no sanction to the claim of property in man. If in its origin slavery had any relation to the government, it was only as the scaffolding to the magnificent structure, to be removed as soon as the building was completed. There is in the Constitution no East, no West, no North, no South, no black, no white, no slave, no slaveholder, but all are citizens who are of American birth.

Such is the government, fellow citizens, you are now called upon to uphold with your arms. Such is the government that you are called upon to cooperate with in burying rebellion and slavery in a common grave. [*Applause*] Never since the world began was a better chance offered to a long enslaved and oppressed people. The opportunity is given us to be men. With one courageous resolution we may blot out the handwriting of ages against us. Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U. S.; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has

earned the right of citizenship in the United States. [*Laughter and applause*] I say again, this is our chance, and woe betide us if we fail to embrace it. The immortal bard hath told us:

> "There is a tide in the affairs of men,
> Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.
> Omitted, all the voyage of their life
> Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
> We must take the current when it serves,
> Or lose our ventures."

Do not flatter yourselves, my friends, that you are more important to the government than the government is to you. You stand but as the plank to the ship. This rebellion can be put down without your help. Slavery can be abolished by white men; but liberty so won for the black man, while it may leave him an object of pity, can never make him an object of respect.

Depend upon it, this is no time for hesitation. Do you say you want the same pay that white men get? I believe that the justice and magnanimity of your country will speedily grant it. But will you be over nice about this matter? Do you get as good wages now as white men get by staying out of the service? Don't you work for less every day than white men get? You know you do. Do I hear you say you want black officers? Very well, and I have not the slightest doubt that in the progress of this war we shall see black officers, black colonels, and generals even.* But is it not ridiculous in us in all at once refusing to

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* Negroes held about seventy-five commissions in the army during the Civil War. One member of the First North Carolina Volunteers, William N. Reed, rose to the position of Lieutenant-Colonel.—*Editor.*

be commanded by white men in time of war, when we are everywhere commanded by white men in time of peace? Do I hear you say still that you are a son, and want your mother provided for in your absence?—a husband, and want your wife cared for?—a brother, and want your sister secured against want? I honor you for your solicitude. Your mothers, your wives and your sisters ought to be cared for, and an association of gentlemen, composed of responsible white and colored men, is now being organized in this city for this very purpose.

Do I hear you say you offered your services to Pennsylvania and were refused? I know it. But what of that? The State is not more than the nation. The greater includes the lesser. Because the State refuses, you should all the more readily turn to the United States. [*Applause*] When the children fall out, they should refer their quarrel to the parent. "You came unto your own, and your own received you not." But the broad gates of the United States stand open night and day. Citizenship in the United States will, in the end, secure your citizenship in the State.

Young men of Philadelphia, you are without excuse. The hour has arrived, and your place is in the Union army. Remember that the musket—the United States musket with its bayonet of steel—is better than all mere parchment guarantees of liberty. In your hands that musket means liberty; and should your constitutional right at the close of this war be denied, which, in the nature of things, it cannot be, your brethren are safe while you have a Constitution which proclaims your right to keep and bear arms. [*Immense cheering*]

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